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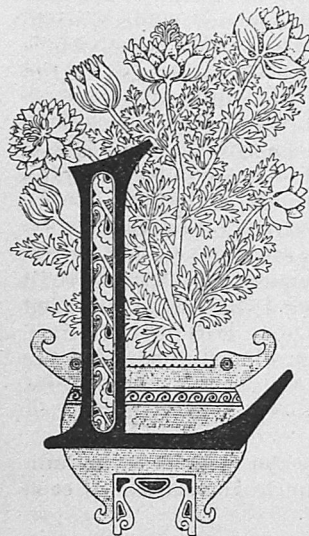
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THE NEW FRESCOES IN THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY AT MONTE CASSINO.

BY THOMAS DAVIDSON.



IFE, whether that of a people, or an age will display its central principle more readily and unmistakeably in its art, than in any other department of activity. In the many forms through which, in recent times, painting has been tending to dispense with originality and sink down into a skillful reproduction of reality, it is easy to see the great defect of our day, the want of an actual, life-shaping belief in the ideal. Painters, for the most part, are so absorbed in the *how* to express, that they have lost all interest in the *what*. Hardly one strives to penetrate beneath the surface, to dray forth and embody the actuality, the eternal purpose of nature, or to find a form adequate to such embodiment.

It may be argued that the mere technical preparation which so completely engages the attention of the artists of our day is a more necessary one for the expression of a new and glorious ideal, whose reality has not yet entirely revealed itself to us. But it was to be expected that this tendency of art to forget its true functions should at last bring about a reaction. Men, especially if certain of their faculties have been abnormally developed, may for a time content themselves with the real, and find delight in it; but it is only for a time. Sooner or later their super-sensual nature asserts itself, and demands ideality, *i. e.* actuality, or spiritual freedom. Perhaps nowhere has the reaction against the current realism in painting shown itself so plainly, or with such splendid results, as in the frescoes with which the recently repaired cells of St. Benedict, at Monte Cassino, are now being decorated, and some of which are here represented in illustrations made from the heliotypes of the original cartoons, published by the monks of Monte Cassino. Of course, neither the heliotypes, nor the engravings from them, can give any notion of the splendor which color adds to these works; still they will help the reader to understand better what I have to say about them. The thoughts which they express have nothing in common with the ideal of the future before alluded to. But, as the older ideal which they have embodied has not yet become obsolete for a large part of humanity, they deserve careful consideration, it will be necessary to say a few words by way of introduction.

Monte Cassino, the oldest, largest and most celebrated monastery in Europe, stands on the summit of a high and steep hill in Campania, overlooking the splendid valley of the Garigliano. It occupies the site of an ancient Pelasgic or Etruscan town, probably named Casinum, of whose Cyclopean walls extensive and imposing remains are still to be seen. When, in later times a new town was built at the foot of the hill, the old town became its citadel, and was occupied by a sacred grove and temples to Apollo, Venus and Jupiter. These divinities were still honored with worship in A. D. 529, when St. Benedict, now forty-nine years old, having been driven from Subiaco by the malignity of his neighbors and the demoralization of his ill-disciplined monks, came here, divinely guided, and accompanied by three ravens and his earliest disciples, St. Paldidus and St. Maur, to take possession of a tract of land which had been presented to him by the patrician Tertullus, the father of Placidus. It seems impossible that christianity should not have been preached at Casinum before that time; but possibly owing to the utter confusion, anarchy, and darkness caused by the inroads of the barbarians, the population finding no help in the Christian God, had fallen back upon their old, and never quite forgetting divinities. At all events, according to the tradition, idolatry there was.

The Saint, on his arrival, began at once to preach the gospel to the natives, and so great was his success that he was soon allowed to hew down the grove on the top of the hill, and to turn the temple of Apollo into an oratory sacred to St. Martin. On the highest point of the hill, where the great hypaethral

alter to Apollo had stood, he built an oratory to St. John the Baptist. This done, the saint proceeded to establish himself and his disciples in the old citadel, which contained among other buildings an ancient tower of Roman construction in which he took up his own abode.

Round this ancient tower the monastery of St. Benedict gradually rose. As soon as the saint had thus secured an abode for his followers, his next care was to provide for them a rule, by strict observance of which they might avoid falling into those disorders which had driven him from Subiaco. This famous rule, the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, is supposed to have been written in the lower chamber of the tower. The motto of Oriental monasticism is *Ora et contemplare*, which may be translated "Mumble prayers and cross your hands," which is indeed about all that the dirty, ignorant, undisciplined monks of the Greek church ever do. The motto of St. Benedict, who was sure that not even prayer could assure a man from the curse of labor, was *Ora et labora*—"Prayer and labor;"—pray with speech and song, labor with hand and head. This is what the sons of St. Benedict, numbered by tens of thousands, having been doing for well-nigh fourteen hundred years. But this is not the place to rehearse what they have done for agriculture and the useful arts, or for literature, science, music and the fine arts.

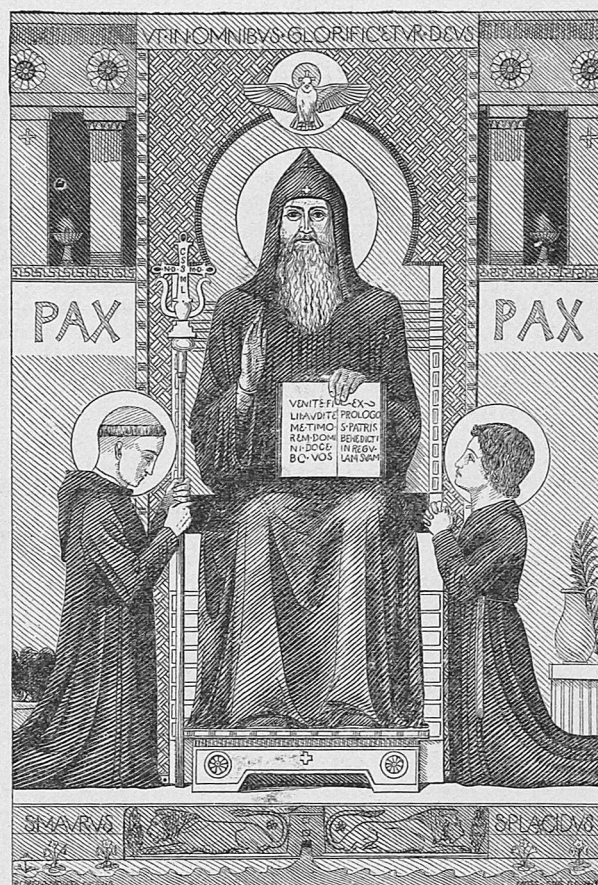


FIG. 1.—ST. BENEDICT.

The monastery built by St. Benedict was destroyed by the Lombards in 589. A second monastery was built by St. Petronax in 718, but was destroyed by the Saracens in 859. The third edifice, erected in 949, was destined to a long and glorious existence, becoming one of the first seats of learning in the world, and harboring within its walls such men as St. Thomas Aquinas, Boccaccio, etc.

It was destroyed by an earthquake in 1350, having in the meantime been pillaged and robbed by Louis, King of Hungary. The monastery underwent many vicissitudes afterwards, and as late as 1799 was pillaged by the French revolutionary soldiers. Its rebuilding begun in 1362 has been gradually approaching its present enormous dimensions for more than 500 years. The present splendid church, a perfect jewel, was begun 1648 and dedicated in 1727.

Some years ago, an American Benedictine the Abbey Winner of St. Vincent's, Penn., suggested the idea of celebrating with due pomp, the fourteen-hundredth anniversary of St. Benedict's birth. The idea was to excavate, restore and decorate all that remained of the sixteenth-century edifice, and this idea

having been favorably received by the Abbot of Monte Cassino, was communicated to the Benedictines all over the world. The various monasteries of the order supplied the money, while the charge of restoring and decorating the excavated chambers, fifteen in number, was placed in the hands of the German Benedictine monks from Beuron, who formed a school of religious art under the direction of Father Lenz.

The subject which most naturally suggested itself for the decoration of the newly recovered chambers was the life of Benedict, the Saint. Not the entire merely human life of the man, with its thousand inharmonious, inartistic details, but the epic part of it, which guided by a single, great, conscious, ideal purpose, had a beginning, an episodic development, full of struggles and victories, and a victorious end, in which the human and temporal was triumphed over by the divine and the eternal. They abandoned the current realism and betook themselves to the ideal art, which at bottom is always religious. They used the external life and form of the saint only as a convenient means of expressing his inner life and character. The real does not express the ideal, the transient is but the ephemeral fashion of the eternal.

While adhering strictly to the ideal and religious mode they made use of the most suitable means for the expression of it in whatever art—Egyptian, Assyrian, Etruscan, Greek, Byzantine, or Christian—they might be found, for they considered that each contributed something we cannot afford to lose.

We reproduce three of the many frescoes that now adorn the chambers of St. Benedict's. Fig. 1 represents St. Benedict enthroned, accompanied by figures in attitudes of devotion.

meeting will be in heaven." We know the rest. The two conversed all night on heavenly things and the next day St. Benedict saw from the very window which gives light to this picture, the soul of his sister ascend into heaven.

The subject of the fresco reproduced by Fig. 3 is the mystery of the Incarnation, which decorates the room called the chapel of St. Scholastica. We see here the two saints, brought by their guardian angels before the divine mystery of the Incarnation. There are other angels with symbols of their virtues, or crowns for their eternal reward. The Virgin and Child are the most conventional of the figures, the reason being that the human figure, when used to express the Divine is a symbol, a hieroglyph and ought therefore, to be stripped of every accidental detail suggestive of change and shadow of turning. Earth and heaven unite to adore the unfathomable mystery. Earth is represented by two exultant angels seated on the steps of the throne and holding censers, from which rise clouds of incense. Heaven is typified by two archangels, who raise their hands and drop their wings in silent wonderment. There is something very Oriental in this fresco. The palms, the winged globe that appears behind the heads of the angels and saints, the regular succession of the figures, with the splendor and simplicity of coloring, are distinctly Assyrian.

This picture may be said to embody the essence of the individual lives of the two saints, whose spiritual relation to each other is shown in Fig. 2.

The other important frescoes are the death of St. Benedict, the crucifixion, the miracle of the flour, the cultivation of the

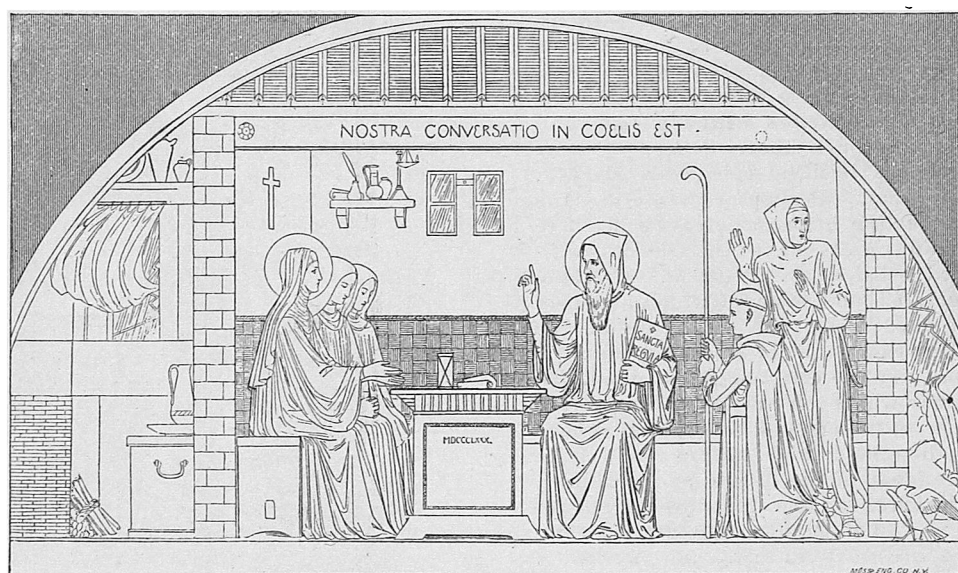


FIG. 2.—THE LAST CONVERSATION OF ST. BENEDICT AND ST. SCHOLASTICA.

Surrounding this company, but not shown in the illustration, are figures of the various old testament patriarchs, whose single characteristic virtues were combined in St. Benedict:—Abraham representing faith and obedience; Isaac, sacrifice; Jacob, wisdom; Moses, the gift of legislation; Elijah, contemplation; and Elisha, the gift of miracles. Fig. 2 represents a beautiful episode in the life of the saint, namely the last conversation of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica. The artist has chosen the moment when St. Benedict seeing that the sand in the hour glass has run out and the time fixed by his rule, which he holds in his hand for being within the monastery has arrived, is in the act of taking his staff from one of the attending monks and of starting out. St. Scholastica, feeling that the end was near and wishing to detain her unwilling brother for the night, for the sake of spiritual conversation, asks God to grant her that favor, whereupon there came such a tempest of rain, thunder and lightning that St. Benedict felt that he had sufficient excuse for the breach of his own rule. The suddenness and violence of the storm are well shown by the blown curtains of the window to the left of the two thunder-bolts falling simultaneously. St. Benedict, recognizing at once the origin of this outburst of the elements, raises his finger warningly and utters the words "Parcat omnipotens Deus, soror!" St. Scholastica, meanwhile, with calm satisfaction, heeds not the storm, but points to the hour glass, which is on her side of the table, as if to say "It is not your time but my race that is run; our next

arts, the return of a fugitive monk and various incidents in the life of St. Benedict.

The mere outline of the frescoes such as we give our readers gives no idea whatever of the brilliancy of the coloring employed. There is not an inch of wall or ceiling in the apartments that is not occupied with a picture, symbol, or decoration. So impressive is the effect of these frescoes that we are constrained to believe that there is some trick or magic about them, and it is only after long study and when we have satisfied ourselves that every line is perfect in beauty, every color simple, every figure natural, yet raised sublimely above nature, that we feel that the only magic used has been that of true art which knows how to express the inner heart of devotion, that ideal panting after the glories of eternity. How well the artist has succeeded in expressing the ideal of a Christian saint only those can feel who have seen the original painting. Even these outlines here presented will bear a great deal of study, and the longer they are studied the more beautiful will they appear.

The colors are few, brilliant, and put on flatly with very little shading. There is no attempt to succeed in the cheap in-artistic stereoscopic trick of making the figures stand out from the background. The aim of the artist was not to cheat the eye nor tickle the curiosity, but to inspire the heart, purify and enrich the emotions, and lift up the soul. My first feeling about their work was also my last—Here is the essence of Christianity expressed in the art of Polygnotos.